

NCVHS on Signature Standards: Not Yet

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Government subcommittee hearings on the development of electronic signatures ended inconclusively this fall, with requests for more input and a sense that the necessary technology may not have evolved.

Following the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act's (HIPAA) provisions for a healthcare-related electronic signature, the National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics (NCVHS) Subcommittee on Standards and Security held hearings on electronic signatures versus digital signatures, the business case for electronic or digital signatures, the government's use and acceptance of electronic signatures, and reports on existing projects for the use of healthcare electronic signatures.

While there are some standards and legislation for the use of electronic signatures, speakers said, the necessary technology has not evolved to provide one clear path for implementing an electronic or digital signature. Most speakers urged that any regulations be "technology neutral." Further, the biometrics needed to make such standards usable are at least one generation behind the demand for their use.

During the hearings, speakers noted that signature requirements would affect HIPAA security regulations because of the need to ensure that only authentic and approved signatures are accepted. Therefore, while the proposed security regulations might be workable at this point, an added signature requirement might make it too difficult for some providers and others that would need to accept such signatures. The subcommittee will be holding additional hearings on this subject, and recommendations are not expected until spring.

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